DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 511 CS 214 678

AUTHOR Woodlief, Ann M.
TITLE Writing Nature in a Computer Environment.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (84th, Orlando, FL, November 16-21, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Computer Attitudes; *Computer Networks; *Computer Uses in Education; Higher Education; Hypermedia; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Nature; *Nature Writing; Student Cooperation; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

For some reason, the idea of the nature writer at work in the open air has been exalted, and it is difficult to think that writing about nature might be compatible with computers, the ultimate indoor toy. However, for students learning to write about nature, a networked computer environment may be the best place to be, not for replacing the experience itself but for writing and communicating it. Nature writing has several distinctive characteristics as a genre which lends itself to electronic connections. First, to write about nature is to realize that words do not convey experience fully. One reason the writer writes about nature, in fact, is to try to convey the unconveyable. Thus, "word-processing" is admirably suited to the process of seeing and re-seeing, writing and re-writing--allowing the writer to revise endlessly and easily. Second, writing about nature requires knowing all the so-called "facts" of the subject, and the computer makes facts available at the touch of a finger. Third, hypertexts (texts embedded in a computer text) can enhance the process of reading for a beginner at reading nature texts. Fourth, writing about nature is a social activity, despite romantic ideas of the writer alone in the wilderness. The whole point of nature writing is rhetoric and communication. Computers offer a fast, easy way to share texts with others without the hassle of paper shuffling. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 377 511

Ann M. Woodlief

Writing Nature in a Computer Environment

Writing about nature, or trying to put one's encounters with the facts and mysteries of nature into language, would seem to be the ultimate outdoor activity.

I visualize Thoreau scratching in his little notebook as he plunges into a swamp near Walden to welcome the first blooms of wild flowers each spring, then sitting at the door of his hut turning those notes into deathless prose. Except that's not exactly the way it happened, for he spent years rewriting and reshaping those words back home in his attic room of his mother's house, though we hope with the window open!

Or there's Annie Dillard, watching for the tree of lights and holding perfectly still on a bridge to watch beavers, but she's grabbing a quick drag on her cigarette when they dive. Most of her writing is on little cards that she keeps organizing and rewriting at her favorite table in a snack shop, drinking coffee, smoking, and holding court with her friends.

For some reason, we have idealized the idea of the nature writer at work in the open air, and are especially appalled to think that writing about nature might be compatible with computers, the ultimate indoor toy. I would suggest that for students learning how to write about nature, a networked computer environment may be the best place to be, not replacing the experience itself but for writing and communicating it.

This isn't as heretical as it might seem. Nature writing has several distinctive characteristics as a genre which lend themselves to electronic connections. Now I realize that many of my pedagogical goals that I'm going to describe can be done with a lot of shuffling of copied papers, and that's what you may have to do if you don't have a computer network. But it's much easier to do electronically!

CS 214678

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A. Woodlief
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

1) When we write about nature, if we do it well, we must recognize that words just won't convey the experience fully. The most appealing aspects of nature are its wild ones, those which do not easily fall into human experience and description, those which show its alluring "otherness." One reason we write, in fact, as Thoreau knew so well, is not just to record facts and stories but to try to capture uncapturable essences, hints of embedded meaning, possibilities of new patterns. We are reaching to touch a world that we know is ultimately untouchable in human terms, trying to embody our respect for its ineffable being. Now that's a tough job, and one never done.

What would suit the processes of seeing and re-seeing, writing and re-writing more than "word processing," and I ask you to think especially about both words. Here we can revise endlessly, fluidly, returning again and again in this fascinating and impossible quest. Now and then we can print out, but we are always aware that we can go back to find new words and bring new insights. The fluidity of the medium matches the necessary endless process we are engaged in as we try to reach through and beyond nature's mysteries.

This fluidity is particularly valuable in a collaborative classroom, where students read and comment on each others's papers, or even read papers written by students from previous classes. As they stretch, seeing viable possibilities for their own voices reflected in those of others, they need a flexible medium. Also they are much less committed to the sacredness of their own initial writings when it is so easy to revise and still have a beautiful paper!

2) Writing about nature requires knowing all the so-called facts of our subject as we can, and then moving beyond them. Research is essential to good nature writing, for we must know all that we can. Increasingly, having that research handy means having an on-line

encyclopedia, so it's there for us at the right moment. Or it means being able to negotiate the electronic library catalogue. Granted, it also means time spent in the field, on the river, crouched in shade on the desert, whatever, for those precious fresh observations, but it also means we must know more than we can see at the time.

As research resources available electronically continue to increase, both on the Internet and on CDs which may be available, student nature writers will find more information at hand, ready to be transformed into memorable words. It has been my experience that when students can find information rather quickly, especially as they are processing their words, they soon realize the payoff of knowing more and trek right over to the library!

Students can also pool their own information on subjects in an collaborative computer environment. If several students are working on papers on similar subjects, they can go out separately to do research and then present it on the computer, gathering their different discoveries and responding to those of others.

3) Hypertexts can teach students much about how to read better, both texts in writing and natural "texts." Early in the semester my students read the "nature writing" chapters of Thoreau's Walden in a study hypertext I have prepared. Embedded in this text, and available at the click of the mouse, are all of the questions and much information that a more experienced reader would bring to the thorough re-reading of a text. In addition, students can follow links through the text; for example, they can read in succession all of the passages in the work about birds, and then write about the kinds of meanings that Thoreau finds "embedded" in this aspect of nature.

Reading in hypertext does something rather wonderful to a person's perception of

reading anything. Students soon realize that any kind of reading involves seeing "beneath the surface" possible interpretations and meanings, even questions that never quite get answered. This applies to the reading of nature as well, for as they soon decide, nature is a hypertext embedded with numerous possibilities of meanings, many of which depend upon having information and asking the best questions. To write about nature is to pull out that embedded hypertext.

4) To get back to the writing advantages in working with the computer I need to start with one important premise: writing nature is a most social activity. That may sound strange, as we think of our favorite writers stalking their territories, always alone. They record intense experiences which rarely even mention anyone else, even if someone else is present. I remember taking a nature writing class on a little field trip to the James River, and discovering that we immediately went our separate ways, needing to look and take notes alone, not wanting to dilute the experience with common conversation.

But the whole point of nature writing, I would suggest, is rhetoric and communication. The ultimate experience for one alone in nature is, as Thoreau says, a silent one, with a communion which goes beyond words. So there is no need and perhaps no desire to write unless there is at least one reader. The point of nature writing, then, is re-creation, helping someone see as you see, feel as you feel, think as you think. It may also be more rhetorical than that. The writer may want to persuade the reader, subtly but effectively, that such experiences in nature are inherently valuable and even necessary for personal or moral reasons. Our goal may be even more overt, converting those who do not see and therefore damage our world so that they will see and respect nature, understanding their place there

and behaving more responsibly.

Therefore, I think that any class in nature writing should be intensely collaborative. Writers should be sharing their writing at all stages, responding to each other and learning from each other ways that they too can try to see and say. Sharing electronically, whether through a networked communications program or through e-mail, is a wonderful way to do this. Readers feel more free to say what they think when they respond; writers feel freer to rewrite and add as they see whether their words are working.

In my class, students also can read and discuss the essays written by students from classes past, all of which I have easily available in the electronic syllabus. Though we read a number of essays, somehow these seem more accessible models. These are probably scenes they know from people of their age and experience. Our "virtual" classroom can be expanded even further, for my students are on the Internet. We lurk around the ASLE list, where people interested in nature writing from all over the world talk about books and places. This spring I am arranging e-mail connections with two other classes in nature writing, one at a Colorado College, where students will focus on writing about the Colorado environment, and one at Ohio State on women nature writers. We will read some of the same essays and exchange our responses. Students will also trade papers and talk about problems with trying to "write nature." We'll compare differences in writing about Virginia with writing about Colorado, and we will debate Ohioans about whether being a woman makes a difference when you are writing nature. The possibilities are endless! We have even talked about continuing to write for each other after the class is over; after all, you don't find such good readers just anywhere these days!

Style is just as important as rhetoric for nature writing. This is particularly evident when people write of similar places and things; it's the style that makes the difference. My students do often write of shared places and experiences, especially those that they may share in person. We live near an accessible yet even wild river running through Richmond, the James; we may be an urban university, but we have this treasure, and many students take this as a subject. By sharing their writings on this place, they soon learn much about stylistic possibilities and differences, all without my having to say a word about style.

We also do a lot of electronic chatting about the nature works that we read, discussing how they affect us as readers and what we can learn from them as writers. Again, we share these insights with each other (and I am a member of the conversation, exploring as they are) in a non-threatening, eqalitarian electronic conversation which allows, even demands, that each person have a "voice." One of the major problems for beginning writers is feeling that they HAVE a voice, that they have something worth writing. By discussing these writings and seeing their discussions drawn together, they soon learn just how valuable their own insights are. They are soon ready to move to doing their own writing in their own voices.

Students take to this environment much more easily than one might think. Perhaps they like the idea of having a paperless class and saving a few trees. They definitely like the idea that everyone in the class has spaces to talk and share both the reading and the writing experiences.

Ann Woodlief
Virginia Commonwealth University
Box 842005, Richmond VA 23284
awood@hibbs.vcu.edu